BUDDHISM : SOCIAL VIEWPOINT

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At no other time in human history has mankind experienced such pervasive dislocation and conflict as during the last 100 years. The rapid expansion of knowledge and communication, growth in technology, increase in population as well as transformation of traditional culture and values have profound effects on how people live, relate with one another and view life.

The confusion and disorganization which resulted have earlier been examined at four levels of human experience. At the personal level, an increasing number of people are experiencing frustration, restlessness and anger not quite knowing how to deal with the heightened pace of transciency and paradoxical conduct of human affairs in the political, economic, social spheres. The deep-rooted frustration is expressed through increased violence, intolerance and drug abuse in society today.

At the family level, moral values have changed as a result of materialistic and hedonistic inclinations as well as the changing socio-economic roles of the two sexes. There has been an increase in the rates of divorces and separations, casual extramarital affairs, and incidents of sexually transmitted diseases, all indicative that the marriage institution is on trial. There are many people who believe that marriage is now an obsolete institution which can be dispensed with.

In modern society, various means have been resorted in order to excite the senses and whip up a feeling of deprivation among the masses as an inducement to push sales. The nagging feeling of unmet wants are painfully sustained no matter how much a person has. This is the age of the glorification of greed and the intensification of hatred, both of which will have explosive effects for the society and the world.

The pursuit and flaunting of wealth and power among nations have reached the pitch of insanity, especially in the armament race of building up military hardware which endanger all forms of existence on earth. If mankind does not start learning how to live peacefully

with one another and use science and technology with responsibility, it is doubtful if the human civilization as we know it can long exist.

In other words, Has Mankind a Future? Very limited, if the present trend of universal degradation continues. But can Mankind have a future? An emphatic ‘yes’, if it reforms its ways and relearns to live in accordance with the noble, moral and spiritual standards taught by the Buddha and other religious teachers.

Prescription At The Individual Level

Just as a chain is as strong as the strength of its individual links, for there to be peace and happiness in the world, individuals comprising families, societies and ultimately the world must be at peace with themselves. This is also like a pyramid, its various components within various levels must be strengthened.

People must learn to cure themselves from false views and the universal madness at the individual level, before there can be peace and harmony in the family and society and sanity globally. It is at the individual level that we have to watch our minds with awareness, and by so doing protect ourselves and others at the same time. The Dhammapada says:

“If you hold yourself dear, watch yourself well.’

The Acrobat and the Boy

The need to watch ourselves well by practising mindfulness is illustrated by an analogy, given by the Buddha, of the acrobat and a boy. Once there was an acrobat who performed dangerous acts with his pupil. A slip on either his part or by his pupil could bring injury. In one of his acts, he climbed his bamboo pole and call his pupil: ‘Now boy, climb the pole and stand on my shoulders.’ After the boy had done that, the master said :’ Now boy, protect me and I will protect you; by looking after each other, we will show our tricks, earn money and come down from the pole.’

The pupil thought for a moment and then replied: ‘No master, that won’t do. Why don’t you protect yourself and I will protect myself.

Thus self-protected and self-guarded we will show our tricks, earn money, and come down safe from the pole. This is the method.'

According to the Buddha, just as the pupil had said to his master: 'I will protect myself', so should we practise mindfulness to protect ourselves. This practice will also protect others. By protecting oneself, one protects others; by protecting others, one protects oneself. And how does this by repeated practice, development and frequent occupation with tolerance, harmlessness, loving kindness and compassion. Therefore, by practising these virtues, which can only be cultivated with mindfulness, one brings protection and security to others.

We must not misunderstand by thinking that the act of serving oneself is egoism and selfishness. By serving oneself, we do not mean giving vent to one's greed, since this is not, in the truest sense, service to oneself. Serving oneself means that one should practise self discipline, moral and mental training. While pratising these qualities, one is doing highest service to others. In addition, how can one be of real service to others if one is morally and mentally weak? Is it not true that it is only after one is strengthened morally and mentally that one will be in the position to be of greatest help to others, in providing service based on altruism and not on self interest?

We serve ourselves and others by avoiding evil, doing good, and purifying our mind. This is the crux of what all Buddhas teach. To avoid evil is to refrain from doing acts which are motivated from unwholesome mental roots, that is greed, hatred and delusion. On the other hand, we constantly strive with right effort to act out of compassion and wisdom. This is what is meant by doing good. We purify our minds by reducing and finally eradicating unwholesome thoughts in the mind. In addition, we extend our thoughts of universal love and kindness to all beings without discrimination. We radiate goodwill to all beings and wish that they are well and happy, free from harm and danger and free from pain and suffering.

Purity Of Conduct And Mind

The Buddha has shown a clear and direct method how we can develop our potential for purity and wisdom. Although others can assist us in developing our potentials by providing certain external conditions, it is important to remember that the actual work must be done by ourselves. Others can show the path, but we must walk the way. We must realise the importance of developing purity and wisdom, taking an active interest in the cultivation of these virtues, and using effort and determination to cultivate them.

And what is this method which the Buddha taught? This method remained unchanged since he first taught it to the five monks after gaining Enlightenment at the age of 35 years right up to the time of his passing away. The Buddha taught the Noble Eightfold Path, that is the Way leading to the cessation of Dukkha.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a Middle Path, avoiding the two extremes of searching for happiness through pleasure of the senses and self motivation. The practice of this Path can give rise to vision and knowledge, and lead to calm, insight, enlightenment and Nibbana. This Path contains the essentials of a spiritual training: moral conduct, mental culture and wisdom.

In strengthening our moral conduct, we practise three factors in the Path, that is, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, which can bring peace and harmony into our lives and those of others in society. In Right Speech, we speak truthfully, kindly, gently and meaningfully. We avoid falsehood, slanderous and harsh speech as well as idle chatter. By right action is meant acting with kindness and compassion so that our actions are beneficial and peaceful. We should abstain from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Right Livelihood means that we earn a living through peaceful means and without violating good moral principles and harming or posing a danger to others.

Mental culture is important because the mind is the fountain-head of our speech and action. Impurities of speech and actions have their roots in the mind. Our happiness and sorrow have also originated in the mind. According to the Dhamapada, if one speaks or acts with a

pure mind, then happiness follows one like one's shadow. But on the other hand, if one speaks or acts with defiled mind, then suffering follows one like the wheels follow the hoof of the ox that draws the cart.

Three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path comprise mental culture: namely, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. In practising these three factors, we apply effort in order to reduce and remove bad thoughts as well as to produce and develop good thought. We have also to be constantly aware of the body, feelings, mental states and thoughts. Furthermore, we strengthen our mind by consistently focusing our mental energy by developing one-pointedness of the mind. We should avoid taking intoxicating drugs and liquor since this can cloud the mind and make the practice of mindfulness (which is so vital to the truth seeker) difficult, if not impossible.

Greatest Service to Others

The discipline of our conduct and mind will strengthen our wisdom which is composed of two others factors of the Eightfold Paths. Right Understanding and Right Thoughts: Through practice of morality and mental culture, our understanding of things as they truly are will increase, ultimately enabling us to realise Ultimate Reality. Increased wisdom also means that our thoughts will be kind, selfless and harmless and which enable our speech and action to become better spontaneously. Therefore, the Eightfold Path is indeed a consistent system of interacting factors which strengthen each other with practice; the practice of moral conduct strengthen mental culture; the practice of both these groups of factors reinforces wisdom and the strengthening of wisdom will in turn further promote the purification of conduct and mind.

To reiterate, the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is not selfish individualism and one cannot make good spiritual progress with selfish motives. People who make allegations that purifying oneself is a selfish goal fail to appreciate the interactive process in the practice of the Dhamma and the pervasive radiation effects through the vast network of linkages which beings have with one another across space and time.

We cannot ignore others in practising Dhamma: our pursuit of happiness is not independent of the happiness of others. Our understanding of the Buddha Dhamma requires us to act with responsibilities and compassion. Our speech, actions and thoughts should always be directed with generosity, love and kindness. We must not be insensitive to the needs of others but be prepared to make sacrifices and be of service and benefit to them. Therefore, when one practises the noble Eightfold Path with earnestness, that is discipline one's moral conduct and thoughts one does the greatest service to the world.

Prescription At The Family Level

The keywords to be emphasised for there to be harmony at the family level are: love, mutual respect and responsibility. If a reclusive person lives his life by looking after his own immediate needs, he will probably not create many problems. But if he was to practise a similar attitude as a member of a family or society, such an attitude of overlooking the needs of others may cause problems. Concern for others is an important ingredient when people decide to set up families.

Many young people want to get married because they are 'romantically ' in love. But if we examine the nature of this romantic infatuation, there is always a very strong element of selfishness of wanting to possess another for oneself. This is exemplified by love songs :'I want to hold your hand', 'You make me feel brand new' and so on. It is always 'I', 'me', mine' to the extent of forgetting the needs of the other party, Many people mistake these feelings for love and concern, only to discover the reality after the marriage bond had been forged.

True love between two people should go beyond this selfish concern. It should express love and care for another and make sacrifices so that the other party can be happy. True love takes times to develop as a marriage relationship matures, and it can be far deeper and vaster than the glitter of mutual attraction during the courting days.

Relationship Between Husband And Wife

In a family life, one should think beyond oneself, and develop a deep concern for the well being of one's partner and children. One should also develop contentment in one's partner and not be unfaithful by having extramarital relationships. This is in line with the third precept. Seeking to satisfy one's sensual desires and lust at the expense of the other partner is selfish since this can shake the very foundation of the family. A family should be a product of love, bounded by mutual trust. The moment when one partner becomes unfaithful, the confidence and faith the couple have for one another is shaken, suspicion arises and the bond of love and trust is drastically weakened. Not only does the relationship between the couple suffer, the children will also suffer as a result of the insecurity and marital problems faced by their parents. Unfaithfulness, therefore, brings pain to the members of the family and close relatives as well.

The love and respect between the husband and wife has a special quality which is almost religious. It is considered to be a crucial aspect of the 'sacred family life'. Both partners should be faithful, respectful and devote to one another. According to the Buddha in the Sigalovada Sutta, the husband should always treat his wife with respect and love; be sincere and faithful to her; provide her the physical and material needs; and should not forget to buy her presents to please her. The wife should look after the household affairs well; be energetic in her activities, love and be faithful to her husband and entertain guests, visitors, friends, relative and employees.

There are four kinds of home: one which is inhabited by two ghosts; one with a god and ghost; one with a goddess and a ghost; and one with a god and goddess. At home when one or both the partners are not understanding, always angry and hateful, spiteful and a constant source of trouble, vengeful, selfish, break the precepts and disregards the Dhamma is a home with ghosts. On the other hand, a home in which one or both the partners are loving, understanding, patient and tolerant, forgiving, loving and compassionate, selfless, observe the precepts and encourage is inhabited by a god and goddess. A home with both male and female ghosts is always brewing with dissension, while a home with either a god or goddess

will experience some stability because of the good nature of one of the partners. The ideal Buddhist home should be one in which both the husband and wife are loving and understanding, a home where a god and goddess reside.